

Bridge collapse sends interstate highway into river

By McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff

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The collapsed bridge where I-5 crosses the Skagit River in Mount Vernon, Washington, on Thursday, May 23, 2013.

A large section of Interstate 5 highway collapsed into the Skagit River in Washington state on Thursday. Two vehicles and three people were suddenly plunged into the icy water below as the road disappeared underneath them. Incredibly, the shocked victims only suffered minor injuries.

Rescuers pulled the lucky people from the water after the dramatic incident, which started when a truck with an oversize load hit a steel beam on the bridge.

That strike caused a massive piece of the bridge to wobble, and then fall into the water. It took with it a gold pickup truck, its trailer and an orange SUV.

Officials conducted a search of the river and are now “optimistic” that no one else fell into the water.

Miraculous Survival

One of the victims, 47-year-old Dan Sligh, said he was happy to be alive.

“You talk miracles,” Sligh said outside the hospital where he was treated. “I don’t know what you

want to call it. When you're sitting down in the water and all that mangled metal of the bridge. You look around and you pinch yourself."

Sligh and his wife Sally were in the pickup on their way to a Memorial Day camping trip when he saw an 18-wheeler truck hit the side of the bridge.

The structure shook and then collapsed. Sligh described the terrifying fall into the river. "Forward momentum just carried us right over and we saw the water approaching," he recalled. "You just hold on as tight as you can. Then just a white flash and cold water."

Sligh said he dislocated his shoulder but got out of the vehicle. His wife was knocked out but he was able to keep her head above the water until the rescuers arrived more than an hour later.

A 20-year-old man who was driving the SUV was also able to get out of his car.

Residents Warned To Avoid The Area

The incident left a huge hole in the highway that connects the city of Seattle with Canada and the rest of the Pacific Northwest region.

Officials said the road will not be fixed for several weeks, and the Transportation Safety Board is launching an investigation into the collapse.

Authorities urged residents to avoid the area for the foreseeable future. "We Washingtonians are going to have to do what we do best, which is to hold together, to show strength of character and a good deal of patience," Governor Jay Inslee said in a news conference.

Inslee said he was relieved that the injuries were not greater.

Traffic Chaos Predicted For Months To Come

The bridge is used by about 70,000 vehicles every day, 12 percent of which are trucks. All these vehicles will now have to find another route over the river.

Transport spokesman Travis Phelps said, "This is going to be a long-term traffic issue, because we need to rebuild this section of I-5." But he added the shutdown and inconvenience for motorists would last for "weeks" rather than "years."

This could mean that a temporary bridge will be installed. But Phelps said "right now, it's way too soon to tell" what might happen.

Skagit Bridge Classified As “Fracture-Critical”

The bridge, which was built in 1955, was inspected twice last year. Repairs were also made in 2012. It is examined underwater every 60 months.

Engineers weren’t concerned about this particular crossing. Several previous inspections showed that there was nothing to be worried about.

The National Bridge Inventory lists the condition of every bridge in the United States. The structure of this bridge above the water had been rated as “fair” while the supporting structure was described as “satisfactory.”

But this crossing is nearly 60 years old. When it was constructed, bridges were often designed in a way that meant one failure in a key location could ruin the entire structure, causing it to collapse. This type of design is now known as “fracture-critical.”

“You Don’t Want To Take Chances”

There are 362 fracture-critical bridges in Washington state alone. “It doesn’t imply anything bad about the bridge. It just means that if a certain component fails, it can lead to a complete collapse,” said expert Jugesh Kapur.

Kapur said a truck hitting the bridge’s supporting structure is certainly capable of causing a failure. Guardrails are supposed to prevent such strikes by vehicles.

“Generally, there’s a traffic barrier to protect the bridge. You don’t want any part to be hit. You don’t want to take chances,” Kapur explained.

The metal parts of the structure also weaken over time, he added.

Terrible Tragedy In 2007

A similar bridge in Minneapolis fell into the Mississippi River on Aug. 1, 2007.

Rush-hour traffic stalled on that crossing, the bridge went into free-fall, and dozens of vehicles plummeted into the water.

This collapse killed 13 people and injured 145. But that bridge was known as a decaying structure - the Skagit bridge that collapsed on Thursday was not. It was just old-fashioned.

